

27 May 1984

SCHLESINGER/ BRINKLEY: Mr. Schlesinger, Mr. Helms, thanks very much
HELMS INTERVIEW for coming in. It's a pleasure to have you with
us today.

I'd like, first, to ask you the same question we've asked everyone else about this massing of Iranian troops we heard about this morning. I wonder if you could add anything to what we know about it. Mr. Schlesinger?
JAMES SCHLESINGER (former CIA director): I think that the massing of the troops is not really much in the way of news. These buildups occur regularly. This one has been reported some time. Indeed, the news has been the slowness, on this occasion, in which the Iranians have moved against Iraq after making these threats for an extended period, and their turning to attacks on the tankers, which suggests that they think that they may have exhausted their possibilities for overrunning Iraq. It merely suggests that. HELMS:* If they're going to attack, it seems to me in the next two or three weeks would be the time to do it for religious reasons. The holy month of Ramadan starts on May 31. Now in history, the prophet Mohammed had his first great military victory in the battle of *Bagra in 624 A.D., so the holy month is alleged to be the magical time in which to attack the infidel, even though he happens to be lot of Moslems on the other side.

WILL: Mr. Helms, the conventional wisdom has been that Khomeini has the population base and the fanaticism to continue this indefinitely, but we just heard the ambassador from Iraq say far from being a religious fanatic, he is deep down inside a politician who knows how to make a deal and cut his losses. Is that your assessment of the man? Is this a war that can end with a conventional deal? HELMS: I don't think so, because I think the Ayatollah Khomeini has a blood feud with Pres. Saddam Hussein of Iraq. I really believe this. He sees that he, Khomeini, got the shah, he got Jimmy Carter, and he has every intention of getting Pres. Saddam Hussein, and he wants his head on a platter, and I don't think he intends to stop the war until he gets it.

BRINKLEY: Well, Khomeini was hiding out in Iraq and was kicked out, wasn't he? HELMS: That's right. That's one of the reasons why he's mad at Saddam. He's also mad at him for attacking his country.

WILL: Mr. Schlesinger, you said in several interviews recently that the United States must think now about what

* Richard Helms (former CIA director)

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it ought to do should the Iranians break through the Iraqi lines, because that would be unacceptable, you say, to have an Iranian victory. What should we be deciding to do? SCHLESINGER: Well, in the first place, commenting on Khomeini, he is a man who has bided his time patiently over 20 years. He has great tenacity. He is not going to give up. I think that your judgment was correct and that the ambassador was being quite diplomatic. With respect to the issue in Iraq, we've got to face the question now what kind of outcome we would prefer, and if we decide that overrunning of Iraq and the collapse of the government is unacceptable to us, then we should act now. Otherwise, we should go along.

WILL: Doing what? SCHLESINGER: Under the circumstances we would have to ensure that the Iraqis are not overcome, which means to inflict a blow on Iran.

DONALDSON: Well, now, what does that mean? You say inflict a blow on Iran. Who does it? Do the Saudis do it? Does the United States of America do it? Does the (sic) Europeans do it? Mr. Helms? HELMS: I would have thought that the way to deal with this whole situation was to, contrary to George's view that the Saudis can't do anything, I think this is a situation which they can handle. The Iranians have about 20 F-4 Phantom fighters. The Saudis are alleged to have about 60 F-15 planes. Now, with F-15s, the highest performance combat plane we've got, backed up by AWACS that tells the pilots exactly the direction, the height and the speed in which other planes are coming towards them, the Saudi pilots ought to be able to deal with that situation, and if they can't deal with it, they can't deal with anything.

DONALDSON: Can they deal with it without the long-range tanks, fuel tanks? HELMS: Well, this is a question of whether we would provide the tankers to refuel them to attack Iran.

DONALDSON: We're talking about doing that, aren't we? We're sending in KC-130s... HELMS: I would think that probably the chances are we would. After all, the United States doesn't want to get involved in this war if we possibly can't. What do we gain by shooting down anybody's aircraft, be they Arab or Iranian? We simply anger more people.

DONALDSON: But we keep the shipping open. Dr. Schlesinger, answer your own question. Who strikes Iran? SCHLESINGER: Now, wait. I want to distinguish between the question that was just answered and the question that Mr. Will asked. The question of how to deal with Iranian air attacks, I think that the administration has acted prudently and that Ambassador Helms is right. Let the

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Saudis, let the gulf Arabs take the first blow. Mr. Will asked a different question. He asked the question, if Iran is going to overrun Iraq, what actions should the United States consider? And that is a much more serious development, because the interdiction of oil tanker traffic in the gulf is beyond the capacity of Iran and, therefore, we will be receiving enough oil. But the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime has great political significance in the gulf.

DONALDSON: But at the end of your answer to Mr. Will, you used such words as 'a blow should be struck' against Iran, so my question is, who strikes that blow if it comes to pass that it looks like Saddam Hussein is going to fall?

SCHLESINGER: Now, be careful what you say here, because what we are thinking about is the United States considering an advance to consequences of the fall of Saddam Hussein and deciding whether or not that is tolerable. If it decides it is intolerable, then the blow that would have to be struck would be by the United States.

DONALDSON: We would strike the blow... SCHLESINGER: Correct.

DONALDSON: ...if we decide ... SCHLESINGER: Correct.

DONALDSON: ...that Iraq cannot be lost to the Ayatollah Khomeini? Would that action make the American public...

SCHLESINGER: I am quite doubtful of that, and I think that the American administration would be reluctant to move in that direction. Some months ago we talked in terms of tilting towards Iraq. Subsequently, we criticized Iraq for the use of poison gas. Now we are pretty much running up the middle of the road with regard to this war.

BRINKLEY: We heard the president some time ago, several months I think, say that he would guarantee that the gulf be kept open and oil shipments continue to move. It appears that there is some likelihood now that he will be called on to keep that promise or to do something. Are we in a position to keep a promise like that, militarily and otherwise? HELMS: If we were to take this job militarily, it means that you have to have in-flight oil, and we've got enormously expensive and difficult air cover to fly, and why should we do it if we can get the Saudis and fix them up to do it themselves?

WILL: Well, that is the question of Saudi political will. We have provided them with the finest assets the American arsenal can invent to sell. Is there any reason to believe on the basis of, say, the last 15 years of our

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dealings with the Saudis, that they want to help? HELMS: Well, let's test it. Let's find out.

WILL: OK. If they do, it's of vital interest of the United States. If they don't, are we not committed then, since we've defined it as a vital interest to do it ourselves? HELMS: Let's not walk into it unless we have to.

BRINKLEY: I want to hear Dr. Schlesinger's answer to this question. SCHLESINGER: We are testing the Saudis right now, and I think that there is some doubt whether or not they will match up to the test, but we're in the process of doing so.

BRINKLEY: By keeping the gulf open. SCHLESINGER: The answer to that is we are not in a position to do so with high confidence because we lack a base structure in the base region. We have carriers that are outside the gulf. The reach of those carriers at the moment is inadequate. It is plausible, but very risky, to send a carrier into the gulf. If we do not have an adequate base structure then we would have to indulge in actions that are very risky.

BRINKLEY: It doesn't sound like we would want to carrier into the gulf, does it? SCHLESINGER: Understandably not.

WILL: Do you think the United States should ask for, ask the Saudis to give us landing bases in Saudi Arabia? And you know the political climate of the town. What would Congress be apt to start saying? SCHLESINGER: I think that we should, now and in the past have pressed the Saudis for base access rights, because securing those oil fields is in the vital interest of the United States as leader of the free world, if not as an importer of oil from the Gulf.

BRINKLEY: Mr. Helms? HELMS: I'm sure we have pressed the Saudis, and the Saudis don't want to give us space rights. I think it's as simple as that.

DONALDSON: Mr. Helms, pick up on what your assessment is of the Soviet Union's potential role. There is evidence that perhaps the Soviets aren't willing to fish in these troubled waters with the great speed that they might in some other circumstance. HELMS: I think that's undoubtedly true. I don't think that they want to fracas with us over the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, if we were to start attacking Iran, then I think it might change the nature of the ball game dramatically, because if Iran were to collapse for some reason, then the Soviet Union is on the Strait of Hormuz, bing, just like that, and this is something we, obviously, don't want to see.

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DONALDSON: Something that Truman prevented right after the war. HELMS: That's right.

DONALDSON: What about your assessment of the Soviet role? Now, there is a report that they might sell SS-21s to Iraq. SCHLESINGER: I think that they are indeed fishing in troubled waters, that they have moved back and forth between Iran and Iraq. At the moment, they see the balance of advantages in supporting the Iraqis, and they have increased the flow of weapons. In this way they are cementing their relations with the Arab countries once again, and they are punishing Iran for its actions in dealing with the internal communist movement.

BRINKLEY: Mr. Schlesinger, Mr. Helms, thank you very much for an interesting, if slightly unsettling, discussion. It's a pleasure having you with us today. Thank you.